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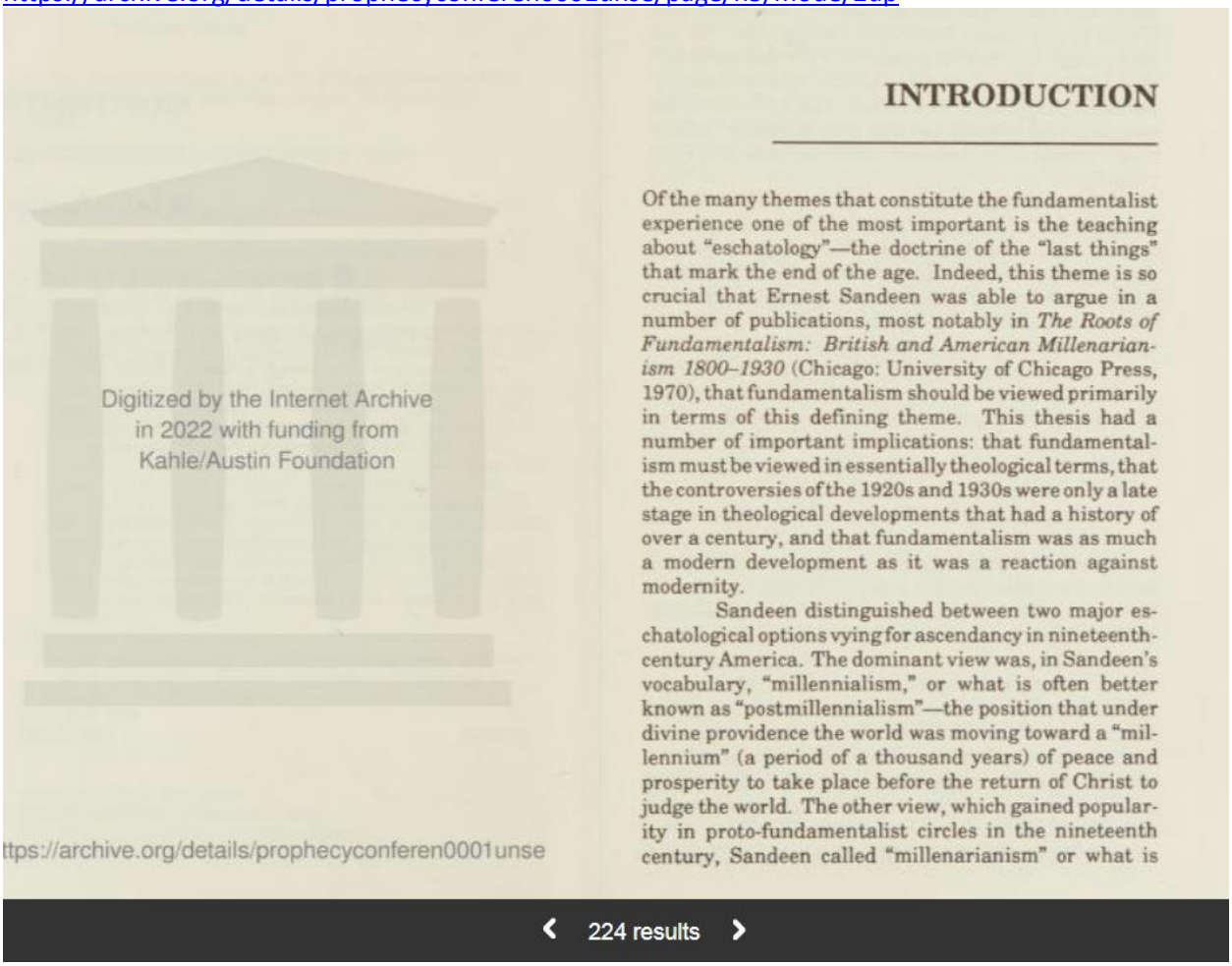
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INTRODUCTION

Of the many themes that constitute the fundamentalist experience one of the most important is the teaching about "eschatology"—the doctrine of the "last things" that mark the end of the age. Indeed, this theme is so crucial that Ernest Sandeen was able to argue in a number of publications, most notably in *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), that fundamentalism should be viewed primarily in terms of this defining theme. This thesis had a number of important implications: that fundamentalism must be viewed in essentially theological terms, that the controversies of the 1920s and 1930s were only a late stage in theological developments that had a history of over a century, and that fundamentalism was as much a modern development as it was a reaction against modernity.

Sandeen distinguished between two major eschatological options vying for ascendancy in nineteenth-century America. The dominant view was, in Sandeen's vocabulary, "millennialism," or what is often better known as "postmillennialism"—the position that under divine providence the world was moving toward a "millennium" (a period of a thousand years) of peace and prosperity to take place before the return of Christ to judge the world. The other view, which gained popularity in proto-fundamentalist circles in the nineteenth century, Sandeen called "millenarianism" or what is

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more often called "premillennialism"—the position that Christ would return before the millennium. In the background but less important for the developments that took place was another option, "amillennialism," the belief that the relevant biblical passages should not be interpreted literally and that references to a "millennium" should be understood metaphorically and symbolically.

Premillennialists come in several varieties: "historicists," who attempt to match biblical prophecies to contemporary events (often in an attempt to predict the exact date of the return of Christ); and "futurists," who see the events of biblical prophecy still in the future. The latter position often found expression in a more extreme form that was usually called "dispensationalism." This view is especially known for its "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15), or interpreting the Bible according to its relation to various "dispensations" or periods in the history of redemption. Each of the periods had its own characteristic scheme for God's activity and humanity's expected response.

Dispensationalism may be further broken down into a variety of options, including several regarding the doctrine of the "rapture," an event of the Second Coming sequence in which Christ is expected to return to take his saints into heaven before the events of the millennium. Proper dispensationalists are "pre-trib," "mid-trib," or "post-trib," depending on how they understand the timing of this rapture with regard to a period of suffering (the "tribulation") that is to be a special feature of the age just before the millennium. These fine distinctions, rather esoteric to outsiders, were (and continue to be) the occasion of acrimonious debate and have, as we shall argue later, significance far beyond the chronology of the end of the age.

The roots of premillennialism are disputed. Advocates argue that this was the dominant view of the early church and that they are merely restoring original and orthodox Christianity. Critics point to the nineteenth-century origins of the particular themes that dominate the dispensational variety of premillennialism. Protestants have moved back and forth between postmillennialism and premillennialism, especially in periods of revival that seem to promise the advent of the millennium and in times of social change that seem to enliven the more "apocalyptic" of the biblical texts. Some interpreters of the development of these doctrines suggest that the American Great Awakenings of the eighteenth century, especially as they found expression under the ministry of Jonathan Edwards, gave special impetus to the postmillennial view on the American scene. Though it was little interested in eschatological speculation, Methodism brought to the American scene a "perfectionism" and optimism that raised the ante in eschatological discussions and seemed to bring the millennium nearer. Such themes found broad cultural support in the optimism of antebellum America and lay behind many of the characteristic reform and utopian movements of the era. Thus mainstream American Protestantism was dominated in the nineteenth century by a more moderate form of postmillennialism. There was, however, as Sandeen and others have shown, a vital but more subdued strand of premillennialism throughout this period.

In the eschatological ferment of the early nineteenth century, two strands of premillennial thinking were especially important for later developments. Various chronological schemes (for example, the one devised by German Pietist biblical scholar Johann Albrecht Bengel in the eighteenth century) drew attention to the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century. William Miller (1782–1849), a self-taught Baptist

preacher in upstate New York, developed a scheme of interpretation that proposed several dates of the Second Coming for the early 1840s. The failure of these predictions led to what was called the "Great Disappointment." The "Millerites" were devastated, but many of them later regrouped in a variety of movements or denominations, especially the Seventh-Day Adventists, under the influence of prophetess Ellen White, and a more orthodox group called the Advent Christians.

The extent to which this movement influenced later fundamentalist developments is still very much a matter of dispute. The failure of Miller's prophecies had discredited his movement and the "historicist" school of interpretation in general, so much so that later advocates of premillennialism were much at pains to disassociate themselves from the earlier movement. On the other hand, various adventists, particularly those from the more traditional Advent Christian group, participated in the early prophecy conferences. The issue of premillennialism's antecedents, then, is one of the major questions crying out for additional study.

The rise of late nineteenth-century premillennialism, especially in its dispensational form, is more often traced from the influence of John Nelson Darby (1800–1882). Darby was a prominent leader and the most influential doctrinal teacher of the early years of the movement that has come to be known as the "Plymouth Brethren" (after its major early center in England). In the 1860s and 1870s, Darby toured North America and lectured widely on his views. Prominent American Protestant leaders, most notably the famous evangelist D. L. Moody, fell under the influence of advocates of this view, some during evangelistic tours in the United Kingdom. From these and other sources the premillennial view began to get more attention in the United States, especially from the time of the Civil War, whose social disruption brought apocalyptic categories to the fore.

The advocates of these views soon developed a network of journals, Bible conferences, prophecy conferences, and other institutions. The history of these agencies is narrated in the standard studies of the movement (see bibliography below, especially Sandeen and Weber). Probably the most important and the most noticed of these was the series of public prophecy conferences that began in 1878 and in a sense continues to the present day. The volumes reprinted here report the proceedings of seven of the most important of these meetings, which had a determinative impact on the development of premillennialsim. Many of these volumes are difficult to secure, and it is hoped that making them more readily available will contribute to a more profound interpretation of fundamentalism. They should assist researchers in testing of the thesis proposed by Sandeen: that fundamentalism is best understood in terms of the impact of the teachings propounded in these volumes.

For example, one may see in premillennialism the roots of fundamentalists' depreciation of the broader culture. It is worth noticing that postmillennialists (such as evangelist Charles Grandison Finney of Oberlin College or his abolitionist disciple, Jonathan Blanchard of Wheaton College) founded liberal arts colleges while premillennialists (most notably D.L. Moody) founded Bible colleges or institutes. The postmillennialists saw culture and science as a part of a civilization that under the providence of God was moving toward the millennium. The Bible school founders, however, largely rejected humane studies in favor of teaching the minimal essentials of Bible and evangelism needed for preaching the gospel and announcing the imminent return of Christ. As premillennialists were radicalized by their

conflict with modernists, whatever cultural concerns they had inherited from earlier postmillennialists fell more and more into the background. This insight also helps one to understand the current tendency of many Bible institutes to evolve into liberal arts colleges. While the official teaching of many fundamentalist and evangelical schools is premillennialism, their institutional life seems to develop according to an implicit postmillennialism, a nearly forgotten part of their heritage that has begun to surface again.

A variation on this theme helps one to understand why the "social gospel" was such a bone of contention in the battles of the fundamentalist/modernist controversy. Traditional interpretations of fundamentalism have had difficulty explaining the "great reversal" of the fundamentalist/evangelical tradition on questions of social reform. The postmillennialism of evangelist Charles G. Finney led him (and especially his followers) into various forms of social reform (as evidenced especially in the early years of Oberlin and Wheaton Colleges). The campaigns against slavery or for peace were intimately intertwined with missions and evangelism—all were the gospel agencies that God was using to bring in the millennium. The collapse of this vision and the turn to premillennialism (often by the most radical advocates of postmillennialism) led to an abandonment of social reform. In most variations of the premillennial vision, the current age is seen to be in terminal decline (as in the vision of D.L. Moody, for example), so as to make social reform irrelevant. Some of the more extreme advocates of premillennialism even went so far as to argue that efforts at social amelioration were counterproductive, since things must get worse before the only real hope for humankind could be found in the "blessed hope" of the return of Christ. Thus the battles over the "social gospel" at the turn of the century were really about the presuppositions of competing kinds of millennialism, and many advocates of the "social gospel" understood this to be the case (see the writings of Walter Rauschenbusch or the turn-of-the-century advocates of the "modernist" reinterpretation of Christianity at the University of Chicago).

Such questions are also at the root of the differing visions of the character of mission activity and the church. Postmillennialism looked forward to the conversion of the world as a part of the coming millennial age. Premillennialism looked rather to the preaching of the gospel to all but did not expect the conversion of all. Missions of the Protestant mainstream were thus more susceptible to patronizing attitudes of cultural superiority and strategies of missionary colonialism than were the premillennialists. While they sometimes expressed similar views of cultural superiority, premillennialists had less at stake theologically in them, for they expected that efforts at "Christianizing and civilizing" other peoples would ultimately fail to usher in the millennium. Jesus was coming soon, they thought, and they had better stick to what they perceived as their main task—evangelism.

Premillennialists saw the church as a faithful remnant pitted against a world in decline. The mainstream of Christianity, identified as it was with the broader culture, was viewed more and more as apostate and allied with the evil forces of this world. This led naturally to a more "sectarian" view of the church in which the premillennialists saw themselves as the pure minority over against the apostate majority. The doctrines of premillennialism thus played a profound role in the shaping of the fundamentalist subculture, both in the mentality of opposition that developed over against much of the rest of the church world, and in the sense of

affinity with fellow premillennialists across denominational and confessional lines that would have otherwise divided fundamentalists.

Eschatology has also had its political impact. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the dispensationalists' ideological investment in the state of Israel. It is a central claim of dispensationalism that the church age is a sort of parenthesis in the history of God's dealings with the Jews. Dispensationalists' prophetic timetable predicted that the Jewish people would move to the center of the stage in the end times. This usually led to a form of Zionism that anticipated, even in the nineteenth century, an Israeli state in Palestine. And in the twentieth century they developed an interpretation of the Bible that saw Russia as a key element in the emergence of an alliance against Israel. Much of the "evil empire" view of the Soviet state has its roots in this eschatology. Likewise, one may find some of the roots of anti-Catholicism in one premillennial position, that the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church represent the apostate church and perhaps even the anti-Christ of the end times. Such concerns corresponded with and may have helped to sustain American Protestants' long-standing antagonism toward cities and toward the Democratic Party's urban, largely Catholic power base.

Such suggestions could be multiplied, but perhaps these will suffice to indicate some of the value of Sandeen's hypothesis. It is hoped that the republication of these prophecy conference volumes, which were so influential in forming the eschatology of fundamentalism, will illumine not only the history of fundamentalism but also the continuing struggles today that are still shaped by these questions.

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Note: The numbering system shown here is confusing; "224" is not the page number, but rather it relates to the number of instances found in one of my search terms. They were "great" "reversal". The first numerals were either not shown on the very first actual page, then 1-4 to provide Dayton's entire (excellent) Introduction. You can see the search terms were in the bibliography, while citing his own (other) work.
I did not mind the second source shown by Clarence Bass includes the description, "a critical assessment" ... [found] "in the post-World War II emergence of a 'neo-evangelical' movement to reform fundamentalism."

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